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Commission on the Status of Women
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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Women's National Commission, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the national, official independent advisory body on women of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The WNC has over 670 partner organizations and individual partners including women's organizations in the European Union and United Kingdom based international organizations. The United Kingdom Government has announced as part of its Spending Review in the context of the global financial crisis to move towards greater localism and less centralized government, to abolish many non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) including the WNC. The Government of the United Kingdom however has restated its commitment to the principles of women's advancement and equality.

2. The WNC welcome the fifty-fifth Commission on the Status of Women session focus on access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work. Despite many existing human rights instruments, internationally agreed goals and commitments to address gender inequality in this area, it remains broadly an ongoing challenge steeped in discrimination evidently more so in the gender disparity in access to and participation in science, engineering and technology (SET).

3. Access to education is widely recognized as the gateway to economic security and opportunity, particularly for girls and women. It is cited in international development discourse that educated women are more likely to delay marriage, enjoy better health and participate in family decisions. Access to education has increased globally for girls at all levels, and particularly in primary education, over the last decade. Nevertheless, women's educational attainment does not necessarily translate into improved employment opportunities particularly in SET fields. Among the 20 to 24 year-old population, women continue to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions. Women, who find employment, whether in the informal or formal sector, also face many challenges, including over-representation in vulnerable employment and wage differentials. The creation of UN Women is a positive step in ensuring that specific actions to address these issues are taken forward.

Evidence of the situation in the United Kingdom

4. Since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) in 1995, there have been a number of developments across the United Kingdom to improve educational and training opportunities for women, to tackle the causes of occupational segregation, to increase access to education training and employment for women in their multiple identities and investment to increase women's employment in SET and mathematics, information technology, electronics and the construction industries. Following devolution there have been national policy objectives across the four nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), so the following list is not exhaustive, however major developments have included:

- the establishment and funding of the United Kingdom Resource Centre and associated bodies across the four nations to coordinate knowledge and deliver services focused on advancing women in SET careers;

* Issued without formal editing.

- the establishment in 2006 of the Women and Work Commission (WWC) to examine the causes of occupational segregation;
- two successive Gender Equality Public Service Agreements with underpinning targets to increase women's participation in SET and increase apprenticeship opportunities for young women in the construction industries;
- the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty in 2007;
- the priorities of the Olympics Development Agency (ODA) to provide training and employment opportunities for women across the equality strands in under-represented sectors and opportunities arising from the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games; and,
- the provisions within the Equality Act 2010, including public procurement.

5. The priority of the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women provides a timely opportunity to review progress during the last 15 years, to celebrate improvements, identify challenges and policy gaps across the four nations and highlight non-governmental organizations' priorities. It is also a period of change within the United Kingdom. Large scale cuts in public spending as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review Autumn 2010 and new Coalition Government priorities such as the "Big Society" may have an impact on policy development and resourcing in future years.

6. The Women's National Commission is committed to enabling partners to contribute to the priority theme. In order to stimulate discussion in advance of the fifty-fifth session, the WNC held a partners' event to discuss issues and to inform thinking on the BPfA goal on education more broadly.

7. Partners commented that more needs to be done to encourage girls into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and more money needs to be invested in careers advice training. Partners called for more positive depiction of women in STEM careers in the media and more training for teachers in gender-sensitive teaching methods within the education system to challenge the relatively narrow educational and occupational paths for girls and young women. More could be done to challenge gender-specific stereotypes in early education and the role of men and boys as agents of change should be widely acknowledged. Partners highlighted successful initiatives which could be rolled out more widely. For example, "*Take Your Daughter to Work*" days and awards such as "*Champion for Women*" are helpful in embedding good practice.

8. It is reported that gender stereotypes and attitudes play a major part in women's limited participation in STEM. Partners commented that the imminent rise in university tuition fees will lead to even less participation. In the case of medical students debts of at least £50k will be commonplace upon graduation. This could inevitably lead to disproportionately fewer women entering medical and engineering fields. Partners acknowledge that the current economic downturn creates further challenges for STEM industries which inexorably will have a negative impact on women. The *long hours* culture in many STEM industries impacts on caring responsibilities which disproportionately affects women. Partners therefore would like to see a tightening of the perceived *weak* legal regulations on working time in order to protect the health and work-life balance of United Kingdom employees.

9. Debates around maternity leave and effects on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been the focus at both national and European Union levels, particularly in light of the recent proposal to extend maternity leave to 20 weeks on full pay by the European Commission. Concern has been expressed by partners that this proposed directive has been deemed "*unaffordable*" by the Government of the United Kingdom in light of the current economic situation. Partners feel strongly that policy should not be influenced by temporary economic downturns. There is also an increased fear that it would also make it harder for women, as SME employers would be less likely to hire those of child-bearing age because of the potential costs they faced if the employee became pregnant.

10. Childcare is widely recognized as the number one barrier to getting into work. Without the presence of quality and affordable childcare, a woman's capacity to maintain their desired level of engagement within the workforce is considered to be increasingly difficult despite an increase in paternity leave provisions. Partners called for more employee incentives to be introduced to assist with childcare. The Trade Union Congress (TUC)[1] has been cited as a model of best practice in this area by offering 50 per cent of childcare costs and 75 per cent for single parents.

11. Confidence skills, lack of training opportunities (particularly for returning and older women) and a lack of women role models in senior positions were recognized as additional barriers and partners have recommended a number of measures to address this including introducing more specialist women's programmes in the workplace and "*back to work*" initiatives. In addition, it was recommended that initiatives developed to address women's multiple identities would be a hugely positive step.

12. Although UKRC SET[2] (and associated bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and ODA are widely recognized as exemplary in addressing the gender disparity in STEM, partners recommended adopting more best practice examples and positive models from the United States of America and Europe where initiatives to narrow the gap in participation is proving to be successful. The lack of access to start-up grants due to the economic downturn and recent Spending Review could greatly impact on female entrepreneurs. Similarly, a cut in research funding in the United Kingdom and other developed Member States is leading to a "*brain drain*" to boom countries.

What needs to be done now?

13. The WNC welcomes government legislation and initiatives to address the access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work. The WNC recognizes that though the United Kingdom has made steady and exemplary progress in this area, more needs to be done to improve the situation for women and girls and therefore further consideration should be given in a number of areas. Partners would welcome

[1] The TUC is the voice of Britain at work. With 58 affiliated unions representing 6.2 million working people from all walks of life, we campaign for a fair deal at work and for social justice at home and abroad.

[2] The UKRC is the UK Government's lead organisation for the provision of advice, services and policy consultation regarding the under-representation of women in science, engineering, technology and the built environment (SET).

continued enhancement of legislation for flexible working and improved maternity and paternity leave provisions. Partners would like to see the appointment of a "Gender and SET" government champion at ministerial level to drive a cross-governmental and integrated strategy to tackle gender segregation in education, workforce and science policy.[3]

14. Implementing the public sector duties of the Equalities Act, which responds to women's diversity, enables choice and ensures women's roles within the family are compatible with careers and earning a living, and encourages a broad-based culture change which increases men's roles as carers, would also be immensely desirable. Partners would be very receptive to more media and awareness-raising campaigns targeted at parents, children, business and adults to widen occupational aspirations, explicitly break down stereotyping, profile role models and highlight the relevance, variety and excitement of science, engineering and technology.

[3] United Kingdom Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology policy proposals.